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ABSTRACT

This digest discusses several major issues in the area of assessment of counselor performance, looking at the need for counselor assessment, areas of assessment in counselor performance, evaluation methods, evaluators, and the time of assessment. Several recommendations are made for more effective assessment of counselor performance. (NB)

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HIGHLIGHTS

...An ERIC/CAPS Digest

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Assessing Counselor Performance

Assessment of counselor performance is frequently discussed in professional counseling literature, yet it remains a topic that includes numerous significant issues and few points of agreement. This digest describes some of those major issues and offers recommendations for effective assessment of counselor performance.

Need for Assessing Counselor Performance

The need for assessing counselor performance, although it has not received much specific attention, is evident for several reasons. Counseling usually helps people but also can harm them, for example, through inappropriate counselor-client pairings or through counselor incompetence. Counselor performance assessment is necessary to facilitate good counselor-client matches and/or to remedy incompetence. Assessment of counselor performance thus is inextricably linked to and needed for protection of the public's welfare.

Counselor certification and licensure also are intended to protect the public's welfare. Possession of an academic degree in a counseling specialty is one common credentialing criterion, but academic credentials do not necessarily indicate counseling competence (Hogan, 1980). Therefore, effective assessment of counselor performance is needed in counselor credentialing processes as well.

This need for assessment of counselor performance also relates to the counseling profession itself. A profession evolves positively only when its members continue to improve their functioning. Such development in the counseling profession depends upon having effective methods of evaluating common *and* innovative ways of functioning. Counselor performance assessment thus has the potential to improve the counseling profession.

Areas of Assessment in Counselor Performance

Three general areas related to effective counselor performance have been investigated. The first is counselor characteristics, the study of which is based on the belief that "good" counselors have unique and identifiable personal characteristics, and that if identified, those characteristics can be used as counselor trainee selection criteria. This line of reasoning or investigation generally has not proved fruitful. However, it has continued because of the recognition that clients react differentially to counselor characteristics (sometimes irrespective of the counselor's skills) and that those reactions are important components of counseling outcomes. Today, the study of counselor characteristics is refocused and is intended to facilitate "matching" of counselors and clients. Many counselor characteristics are being investigated; however, Hiebert (1984) has suggested this effort would be better invested in defending the worth of counseling services.

Counselor communication skills have been a second area of extensive study. Verbal communication skills have been examined far more than nonverbal skills, but both are important components of effective counselor performance. Because effective communication is at the heart of counseling, assessment of counselors' communication skills is a primary means of assessing counselor performance.

Although key indicators of counselor performance, counseling outcomes have been investigated even less than either of the other areas. This is due to major difficulties in determining significant outcomes as well as in obtaining data from clients after counseling has ended. Nonetheless, the assessment of counseling outcomes is essential for fully effective assessment of counselor performance.

Methods of Assessment

The assessment of counselor performance includes both subjective and objective processes, with the former far more common. Subjective evaluations of counselor performance include the use of rating forms, judgments of counselors' actual counseling activities, and global judgments by supervisors.

Instruments for assessing counselor performance range from highly subjective instruments that often are quickly created and at best have some degree of face validity, to those that have measurable, empirically established psychometric properties. Two of the latter have found particular favor in the counseling profession—the *Counselor Evaluation Inventory* and the *Counselor Rating Form*. Each has been shown to be effective for evaluating counselor performance (Biersner, Bunde, Doucette, & Culwell, 1981; Dorn & Jereb, 1985). Moreover, they are suitable for use by different types of persons who might evaluate counselor performance (e.g., clients, counselors, or supervisors). Rating forms have the decided advantage of being structured, efficient means of gathering assessment data.

Assessment of performance during counseling is usually accomplished through review of audio or video tape excerpts. Review of taped excerpts has the advantage of allowing assessment (usually through ratings of skills shown) of actual counselor performance, but it has the disadvantage of inefficiency. There also is much debate about the number and length of excerpts needed for valid evaluations (Lecomte & Bernstein, 1981).

Counselor performance assessments based on supervisors' judgments are becoming more common because of their use in counselor credentialing processes.

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Unfortunately, such judgments are often clouded by perceptions of the person (as opposed to performance) and hesitancy to give negative evaluations. Subjective, global supervisor evaluations are not particularly effective indicators of counselors' performance levels.

Objective assessments are based on indicators of client behavior change, and data from these provide the strongest indications of counselor performance effectiveness. Unfortunately, counseling impacts infrequently are specified in terms of behavior change, with the result that few good examples of this type of counselor performance assessment exist. In addition, there is some evidence to indicate that subjective and objective measures of counselor performance yield unrelated results (Alexander & Wilkins, 1982).

Assessors of Counselor Performance

Counselors and their peers, supervisors, administrators, and clients generally are those who assess counselor performance. Counselor self-assessments are common, but probably most useful to counselors themselves (Eldridge, 1981). Because of high subjectivity, self-assessments generally do not have broad utilitarian value. Peer evaluations of counselors also are used frequently, but the competence of peers to make valid assessments is a significant issue in their use. Supervisors are generally deemed competent to assess counselor performance, but often use criteria different from those of other assessors (Butcher & Scofield, 1984). For example, supervisors often are interested in levels of skills demonstrated, whereas administrators are usually interested in accountable outcomes.

Clients are the group most frequently asked to assess counselor performance, but their evaluations also have limitations. They may not be aware of appropriate evaluation criteria, focus only upon general satisfaction, or resist making negative evaluations of counselors. Nonetheless, as counseling service consumers, their evaluations are important.

Time of Assessment

Assessments of counselor performance may be made during counselors' preservice training, immediately after counseling, or as long-term follow-up. The vast majority of such assessments are made during training, sometimes to screen out incompetent trainees. More frequently, however, performance assessments made during training are formative in nature, intended to help trainees achieve required levels of competence before graduation.

Assessments of counselor practitioner performance are usually made for accountability purposes and therefore are summative in nature. Although the need for counselor accountability often has been stressed, that need apparently has not prompted much counseling practitioner performance assessment.

Long-term follow-up assessments of counselor performance are rare, probably because of difficulties in obtaining data from clients long after counseling has ended. However, such data are needed to determine if counseling has lasting effects.

Recommendations for Counselor Performance Assessment

The professional literature suggests that more effective assessments of counselor performance can be achieved through the following:

- Greater emphasis on client behavior change indicators to provide stronger data for counselor accountability.
- Use of multiple assessments, including both subjective and objective procedures, to provide more comprehensive information on the impacts of counseling.
- Further development of instruments used to assess counselor performance to facilitate gathering of data that is theoretically and psychometrically defensible.
- More frequent assessment of counseling practitioner performance, including long-term follow-up studies, to provide more data on the "real world" functioning of counselors.

These improvements are needed because effective assessment of counselor performance is essential to further enhancement of the counseling profession and to protection of the public's welfare.

Resource Documents

Alexander, E. R., & Wilkins, R. D. (1982). Performance rating validity: The relationship of objective and subjective measures of performance. *Group and Organization Studies, 7*(4), 485-496. (EJ 275 977)

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Butcher, E., & Scofield, M. E. (1984). The use of a standardized simulation and process tracing for studying clinical problem-solving competence. *Counselor Education and Supervision, 24*(1), 70-84. (EJ 309 590)

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Eldridge, W. D. (1981). Evaluation of clinical practice: Forms of communication by which counselors receive self-evaluation information. *Journal of Clinical Psychology, 37*(4), 897-902. (EJ 253 586)

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Hogan, D. B. (1980, September). *Defining what a competent psychotherapist does: Problems and prospects.* Paper presented at the Annual Convention of the American Psychological Association, Montreal, Quebec, Canada. (ED 201 929)

Lecomte, C., & Bernstein, B. L. (1981, August). *A comparative study of sampling procedures in counseling process research.* Paper presented at the Annual Convention of the American Psychological Association, Los Angeles, CA. (ED 214 039)

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